SOUTH ASIAN FOLKLORE

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

AFGHANISTAN | BANGLADESH | INDIA | NEPAL | PAKISTAN | SRI LANKA

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SACRED GEOGRAPHY

Sacred geography is an aspect of a people's cosmology, part of the way they see the world as ordered and significant. In South Asia this topic encompasses religious valuations of nature; ideas about the earthly locations of gods and goddesses; memories of the locations of events in the lives of saints, founders, and divine incarnations; notions of center and periphery, and ideas about directional orientation; notions of replication and microcosm; and ideas about the holiness of certain regions and territories.

The religious valuation of nature in South Asia focuses on mountains, rivers, and the wilderness. Mountains and rivers are not only the abodes of deities but also, in some cases, themselves divine. Mountains are most often associated with the god Śiva, by virtue of his ascetic nature and their appropriateness for asceticism and because their shape identifies them with the *liṅga,* the aniconic or phallic representation of Śiva. Rivers are most often goddesses, or the homes of goddesses. The sexual imagery is at its most explicit in the portrayal of Śiva as a male human with the Ganges (India's holiest river, worshipped as a goddess) as a small female figure entwined in his hair.

Other religious values are associated with forests and the wilderness. From within the settled agricultural village, these areas appear dangerous and frightening, the abode of tigers, serpents, hunters, and robbers. But forests and wilderness are also another preferred abode of ascetics and hermits and an important source of renewal of life in the village and kingdom. Trees in temple courtyards and elsewhere bring an element of wild nature into the settlement and are sometimes worshipped as deities or abodes of deities.

Gods are located at other places as well. In brahmanical temple religion, priests invoke the life (*prāṇa*) of the deity into an image that artisans have prepared to house it; the temple can therefore be located wherever its patron desires. In folk religion, by contrast, gods manifest themselves at particular spots in "self-formed" (*svayambhū*), unhewn rocks. People recognize the manifestation because the place is marked by a spontaneous flow of blood, by a cow lactating onto the ground, or by some other natural wonder.

In many cases, a particular place of worship of a deity is understood to be the locus of some event in the deity's life—the killing of a demon, for instance, or the deity's wedding. When a god (or, less often, a goddess) is understood to have descended to earth in human form (as an *avatāra*), a number of different spots are identified as loci of specific episodes in the avatāra's life story. The same is true of places associated with the lives and deaths of religious founders (whether divine or not), saints, and holy persons. Such places are particularly important in Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim religious geography, as well as in the religious geography of Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) and ascetic groups.

A more abstract kind of sacrality inheres in places that are viewed as the center of the world or of some part of it. In Southeast as well as South Asia, such places are sometimes seen as analogous to Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the world in some versions of Sanskrit cosmology. Often a holy place will be surrounded by a sacred precinct, its *pañcakrośī,* the area within a radius of approximately ten miles of it; sometimes the periphery of such a sacred area will be marked by shrines of guardian deities in the four cardinal and four intermediate directions. The direction in which a temple or shrine faces is also often significant: east, for instance, toward the rising sun, for most temples of Śiva and many other gods; south, toward the realm of death, for less auspicious deities and some guardian figures. In paying honor to a deity, shrine, or city, one circumambulates it, keeping one's right side toward it.

Major holy places are often replicated elsewhere, and they frequently contain replicas of other holy places. The best example of this is Vārāṇasī (Banaras, Kāśī). This most holy city contains shrines of important gods from all over India and is itself replicated in many other cities and towns. Most frequently, it is holy places and rivers of North India with which other places and rivers are identified or connected. In addition to Kāśī, places that are particularly prominent in this respect include Prayāg (Allahabad), Gayā, and the Ganges river. The replication can take the form of a simple assertion of identity (a local place *is* Gayā, or it is the "Southern Gayā"); of an expression of the power of the local place in terms of the power of the distant, more famous place (the local place destroys as many sins as, or provides ten times as much merit as, Prayāg); of evidence of the physical connection of the local place to the more distant, more famous one (a lemon dropped into the Ganges comes out in the tank of a local temple far to the south); of a story indicating a god's preference for the local place (Śiva left Vārāṇasī and came to stay at the local place because he liked it better); and so on.

In some cases, it is not only individual places but whole areas that are viewed as holy. Such, for example, is the Braj area for devotees of Kṛṣṇa, who lived there, or the Godāvarī river valley for Mahānubhāvs, whose founder, Cakradhar, wandered there. In other cases, holy places are thought of and visited in sets: the twelve *jyotirliṅgas* ("liṅgas of Light"), for instance, spread throughout India, or the five or six holy places of the god Murukan in Tamil Nadu. By encouraging pilgrims to travel throughout the area in which they are scattered, by enabling the pilgrims to meet others from that area, and even by allowing people who do not travel to the places to *think* of the area as a whole, such sets of places can foster the development of regional or national consciousness.

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SEE ALSO

Buddhist Sacred Geography, Sri Lanka; *Dargāh;* Fairs and Festivals; Goddesses, Place, and Identity in Nepal; *Melā;* Pilgrimage; Sacred Geography, Afghanistan; Sacred Places; Shrines; Water Lore; Worship; Ziyārat

SACRED GEOGRAPHY, AFGHANISTAN

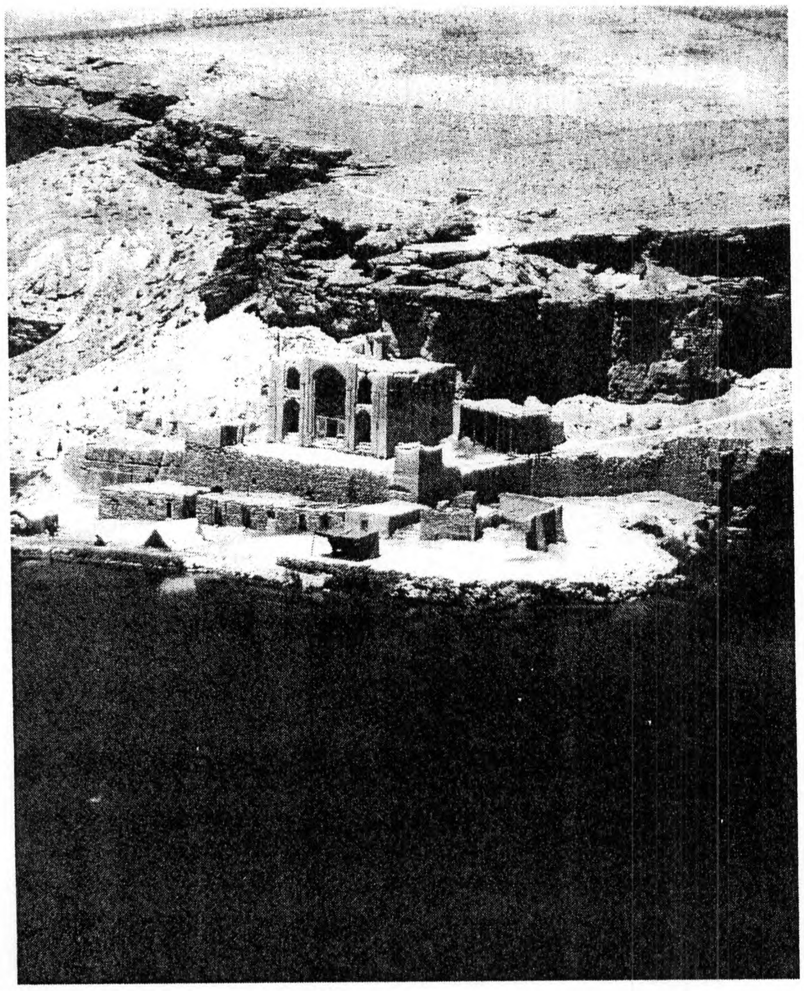
The tradition of associating hallowed locations with the esteemed is widely manifest in Islamic Afghanistan, despite the fact that Islam does not encourage saint cults and numbers of Islamic societies actively suppress the veneration of shrines.

Sites all over Afghanistan are honored because of their linkage with events or personalities mentioned in the Qur'ān, with relics of the Prophet Muḥammad, or with eminent early Islamic heroes. A few may be exploited simply for commercial or political advantage, but typically, in addition to offering hope for sought-after boons, cures, or solace, sites connected with the renowned serve to bond individuals to their heritage and strengthen personal identities by adding significance to their immediate surroundings. Pilgrims to Chishmah-i Ḥayāt (Spring of Life) in Samangan Province, north of the Hindu Kush, hope to meet there the green-robed Khwaja Khiẕr, the only being who can show the way to the spring of eternal life. While Khwaja Khiẕr may roam the world to succor the lost and needy, many believe his abode is actually at this spring of northern Afghanistan. Those afflicted with boils visit Chismah-i Ayyūb, a shrine built over a hot spring in Balkh Province where Ayyūb (Job) is believed to have rested while journeying through Afghanistan.

Similarly, according to Surah 18 in the Qur'ān, certain Seekers of Truth were put to sleep in a cave by Allah to await the day of Revelation. Jordan and Iraq also claim the site of this cave, but the brotherhood at the Aṣḥāb al-Kahf (People of the Cave) near Maymanah in northern Faryab Province, reverently lead pilgrims to a cave where the Seekers and their faithful hound still slumber under shrouded mounds.

Paramount among the locations associated with such venerated figures or events are those honoring the life and miraculous exploits of 'Alī ibn Abi Ṭālib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, fourth caliph of Sunni Islam (656–661 C.E.) and first legitimate imām in the Shī'a tradition. Ḥaẓrat 'Alī is revered for his role as an intermediary against tyranny.

Mazār-i Sharif (Noble Shrine), from which the capital city of Balkh Province in Northern Afghanistan takes its name, is a shrine held sacred as the tomb of Ḥaẓrat 'Alī, although many Sunni and Shī'a Muslims believe that after he was assassinated in 661 C.E., 'Alī was buried in Najaf, Iraq. According to Afghan legend, 'Alī was interred in Balkh because his followers, fearing desecration by his enemies, placed the body on the back of a white she-camel and allowed her to wander until she



Band-l-Amir, Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan, 2000, © Karla Schefter

fell exhausted. On this spot the remains were buried, but all knowledge of it was lost until the twelfth century C.E.

The tradition recounting the rediscovery of the burial is recorded by Abu Hamīd al-Gharnati, an Andalusian visiting Balkh in 1153. In 530 H. / 1135–1136 C.E. the Prophet Muhammad revealed the site to several Balkh citizens in their dreams. Religious leaders at first discounted the revelations until ʻAlī himself appeared in the dreams of a noted jurist. The governor then opened the tomb and found the body in its shroud intact, next to an identifying inscription. The first magnificent shrine was built at this time.

Local lore credits Chingiz Khan with the destruction of this structure in 1220, but written sources are silent. Ibn Battuta in about 1333 described Balkh as "completely dilapidated and uninhabited." Oral and literary sources revive the story late in the fifteenth century C.E. In oral accounts the location of the tomb is again revealed through a dream, but the standard written account, Khwandmir's *Ḥabīb al-Siyār,* states that in 885 H. / 1480–1481 C.E. Shams al-Din Muhammad Bastami arrived in Balkh from Kabul carrying the work of al-Gharnati. Bastami and Balkh's governor opened a domed tomb described in the early work and there found an inscribed tablet corroborating the identification.

So great was the rejoicing when the Timurid ruler Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1468–1506) came from Herat to offer his respects and comission the construction of another splendid building. The form of this building survives today, albeit extensively reconstructed and redecorated. Afghanistan's most elaborate religious gathering is held here during the annual celebrations of the Gul-i Surkh (Red Blossom, a wild desert tulip) festival on Naw Ruz (New Year, 21 March).

Band-i Amīr (Dam of the Amir) is a chain of six lakes in the Hazarajat mountains of the Western Hindu Kush range in Bamiyan Province. The magical combination of sparkling sapphire-blue lakes nestled at the foot of sheer magenta-hued cliffs in a vast barren landscape calls for miraculous explanations. For the Hazāra people living in the region, the answer lies in the intercession of Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī.

The oral traditions describing the creation of the dams that separate the lakes center around Barbar, an irascible infidel king whose conduct became increasingly overbearing when the thousand slaves sent to dam a raging river consistently failed to contain the flood. Everywhere, the people suffered great hardship because of the king's frustration. One victim in desperate need of money to release his unjustly imprisoned wife and children sought the aid of Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī, who instructed the young man to offer him as a slave to the king without revealing his identity. Barbar agreed to the purchase on condition that the slave build the dam he so desired. Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī strode over the mountain and with a colossal kick brought down masses of rock to form Band-i Haībat (Dam of Awe). With a mighty stroke of his sword, he sliced off another huge hunk for Band-i Ẕulfiqār (Dam of the Sword of ʻAlī) and uprooted bushes in great number to shape Band-i Pudinah (Dam of Mint).

Meanwhile, ʻAlī's groom assisted his master by constructing Band-i Qambar (Dam of the Groom) and the thousand slaves who had labored so long in vain were amazed to find Band-i Ghulamān (Dam of the Slaves) completed. As a token of esteem, a passing nomad woman offered the miracle worker a round of fresh cheese, which Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī placed in the river to form Band-i Panīr (Dam of Cheese). Finally, in order that villagers down river might not suffer, ʻAlī drew his fingers across Band-i Ḥaībat to create channels for the river to flow through to irrigate the fields. His work done, Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī revealed his true identity to the king, who was so overcome he immediately embraced Islam.

Darra-yi Azhdahār (The Valley of the Dragon) is a small valley five miles west of Bamiyan, the capital of Bamiyan Province. The valley is sacred because of its association with another miraculous victory that continues Ḥaẓrat ʻAlī's feats undertaken at Band-i Amīr, some forty miles to the northwest.

According to legend, this narrow, barren valley was once the residence of a dragon who roamed the countryside, breathing fire and devouring all that passed his way. Noting the distress of his subjects, the king of the region promised to provide the dragon one beautiful damsel, two live camels, and six hundred pounds of other foodstuffs every single day. In return, the dragon agreed to remain within his valley. Once this bargain was struck, peace reigned throughout the kingdom.

Many years later, the duty of giving up a daughter fell to the lot of an old woman whose ravishingly beautiful daughter was all she had in life. Hand in hand, they proceeded to the mouth of the dragon's lair where their bitter sobs awoke a young man who sprang to the maiden's defense as the dragon emerged. Tulips fell to the ground from his sword as he delivered the fatal blow, splitting the dragon down its entire length. To this day, the body blocks of western exit of the valley. Recognizing that their deliverer could be none other than Ḥaẓrat 'Alī, the king and his subjects came bearing gifts, only to find that their hero had been spirited away on the back of his faithful horse Duldul. Some eighty miles due south of here an even more realistic rock formation represents the dragon's baby, similarly dispatched by the Ḥaẓrat. Scores of pilgrims picnic at both these shrines in the spring.

Aside from the New Year festivities held at Mazār-i Sharīf, the only other formally organized fair takes place, also on Naw Roz, in the capital city of Kabul at the Ziyārat-i Sakhī (Shrine of the Generous One, another title bestowed upon Ḥaẓrat 'Alī). It commemorates the time in 1768 when Ḥaẓrat 'Alī came to pay his respects to the Cloak of the Prophet, which had been placed for a few days in a natural basin on the hillside. The cloak had been obtained by Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747–1772) from the Amīr of Bukhara as part of a treaty settling the northern boundaries. It is now enshrined at Kandahar in the lavishly adorned Da Khirqah-i Sharīf Ziyārat, one of the holiest shrines in Afghanistan.

Most shrines in Afghanistan are, however, simple, even humble, constructions cared for by single custodians. Afghans characteristically dislike ostentation in any form. The most elaborate ritual conducted at Mazār-i Sharīf and at Ziyārat-i Sakhī in Kabul is the raising of the heavy pole carrying the Jandah (Banner) symbolizing the renaissance of spring, the blossoming of renewed hopes with the coming of a new year. Elsewhere, religious occasions eschew set ceremonial performances and are most popularly celebrated with family outings, picnics, new clothes, culinary specialties, and games, plus much spirited socializing among family and friends.

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SEE ALSO

Afghanistan; 'Alī; Dreams; Islam; Muslim Folklore

SACRED PLACES

The idea and institution of sacred places is one of the most complex and powerful expressions of religion in South Asia. The traditional Sanskrit term for sacred place is *tīrtha,* a word etymologically derived from the verbal root *tṝ* (to cross over). There are a number of words connected to tīrtha via the root *tṝ* that mean "raft," "boat," "wave," "escape," "cross a river," "be saved," etc. All these meanings point collectively to the idea of a sacred place being a ford or crossing, at which an individual undergoes a spiritual transformation. The tīrtha also is conceptualized as a doorway connecting the world of the gods and the world of humans. Given the strong metaphoric use of images of rivers and crossings, tīrthas are, in fact, in many cases located near flowing water. Beyond that, they are associated with other natural objects such as mountains (Arunacala in South India), lakes (Manasarovar in Tibet), or stretches of land (Kuruksetra in North India).

The power to transform and heal is thus primarily connected to specific places. The specificity of place has led to tīrthas being described as the "locative strand" of Hinduism (Eck 1980). In fact, in historical